

A PARENTS' GUIDE TO BILINGUALISM AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION

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*A guide to bilingualism from the
BRITISH COUNCIL SCHOOL*



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Bilingualism is not a rare phenomenon and occurs in all countries in the world, in all social classes and in all age groups.

Introduction

It is estimated that more than half of the world's population uses two or more languages in their everyday life, but it remains difficult to know the exact number of people who speak more than one language. What can be said is that bilingualism is not a rare phenomenon; it occurs in all countries in the world, in all social classes and in all age groups¹. In Spain, six out of the sixteen autonomous communities have other co-official languages in addition to Castilian, and many of the residents of these communities are bilingual in the corresponding languages. At the same time, according to Eurostat², Spain is one of the countries in the European Union with the highest percentage of adults who do not speak any foreign language.

In order to improve this situation, one of the main commitments of the Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) has been the introduction of bilingual education in all stages of compulsory education as well as in the second cycle of early years education (ages 3-5). Nearly two decades ago, the MEC and the British Council reached an agreement to introduce a bilingual education programme, the Bilingual Education Project (BEP), in Spanish state schools. This was initiated in response to the general dissatisfaction of both teachers and parents with the outcomes of foreign language teaching in primary schools³. The project was based on the educational model of the British Council School in Madrid, which has been providing bilingual education in Spain since 1940.

Since the BEP was introduced in 1996 with 43 schools and 1,200 three- and four- year old pupils, the interest for bilingual education in Spain has only grown. According to a report by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, in the academic year 2011-2012, 462,013 primary, secondary and vocational education students participated in content and language integrated learning programs⁴. Moreover, another 70,165 were enrolled in schools that offer foreign education. Finally, 91,903 students participated in other experiences in which a foreign language was used for instruction. The latter cannot be considered bilingual education programmes since there is

usually no continuity between the different stages of compulsory education and the instruction in the second language sometimes depends on the availability of teachers to offer subjects in that language. The percentage of weekly instruction time that is dedicated to teaching in the second language in the different types of educational establishments varies from 40% in the BEP to 80% in the private British Council School in Madrid. In this institution, the English National Curriculum is followed and complemented with the subjects of Spanish Culture (Geography and History) and Language and Literature, which are taught in Spanish.

Due to the increasing availability of bilingual education, a growing number of parents are considering whether this type of education could be a suitable option for their child, and it seems logical that they would search for information on the topic. This guide is intended for those parents, and tries to provide answers to the many questions they may have. A variety of topics are dealt with in simple and clear language. These topics range from, for example, the question of what it means when we say that someone is bilingual, the optimum age for learning a second language, the importance of the first language to the potential advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism or the different ways in which parents can support their child at home.

A question and answer format has been chosen since this allows parents to read the guide right from the beginning, as you are doing now, or go directly to those topics they are specifically interested in. However, it is recommended to start from the beginning since many ideas and concepts that are explained in the answers to the first questions may help to understand issues that will be addressed later on. All the information provided is based on recent research on bilingualism and bilingual education as well as opinions by experts in bilingualism. The authors hope this guide will be useful for parents in such an important matter as the education of their children.

Many people believe that “being bilingual” implies the ability to use both languages in the same way as native speakers of those languages.

1 What is meant by being bilingual?

If you were asked to provide a definition of ‘being bilingual’, what would your answer be? It might be that your reply is in line with that of many people for whom ‘being bilingual’ means something like the ability to use both languages perfectly, indistinctly or with native-like command. However, is it right to say that **only those who have perfect and equal command of two languages are bilingual?** Is it common to master two languages equally? Is it necessary to have a native-like level in order to be considered bilingual? And, if we think native-like command is essential, what natives are we thinking of, the highly educated native adult speaker, the adult who can hardly read or write or the two-year-old child who is still learning to talk? It cannot be denied that all three are native speakers of their language.



By asking these questions, it can be deduced that **it might not be so easy to provide a single definition of bilingualism that fits all bilinguals.** Indeed, the concept of bilingualism is a relative one and even in academic research on the subject matter a wide range of definitions can be found with important differences among them. The American philologist and linguist Bloomfield, for example, defined bilingualism as “native-like control of two languages”⁵. However, another American linguist, Einar Haugen,

proposed that someone who is fluent in one language and “can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language” is bilingual⁶. The first definition leaves us again with the question of what type of native speakers should be included in the reference group. The second one, on the other hand, might imply that anyone who is at an initial stage of language learning and is able to say, for example, “My name is Mary and I’m 20 years old” would also be considered bilingual. It seems that neither of the two definitions is very useful in providing an answer to our initial question.

The solution may lie in the definition put forward by François Grosjean, an internationally recognized expert in bilingualism, for whom “bilinguals are those who regularly use two or more languages in their everyday lives”⁷. This definition differs from the two previous ones in that it places **more emphasis on the use of the two languages than on the linguistic competence acquired in the languages.** A bilingual person does not normally use the two languages with the same frequency, in the same contexts, for the same purposes or with the same people. In fact, they use one language or the other depending on the context or environment they find themselves in.

Just like other authors, Grosjean includes in his definition also those who speak more than two languages. However, in this guide the term ‘bilingual’ will be used to refer to the use of two languages and ‘trilingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’ to the use of three or more languages, respectively. The reason for this distinction is that in the last decade several studies have pointed out some differences between the acquisition of two, or more than two, languages.

Since the concept of bilingualism (and, as a result, the question of who can be considered bilingual) is rather confusing, **several authors have made a distinction between different types of bilingualism.** One of these distinctions is related to the age at which the second language is acquired. When a child is born in a family where the father has a given first language and the mother another, and both of them use their first language to communicate with their child, this child will acquire the two languages at the same time. This is called **simultaneous bilingualism.** Yet, when

Bilinguals are those who regularly use two languages in their everyday lives.

Bilingual schools promote successive, balanced and additive bilingualism.

a child first acquires one language at home and then starts learning a second language, as is the case when a child becomes bilingual at school, this is referred to as **successive bilingualism**.

Another distinction has been made between **balanced and dominant bilingualism**. The first term is used when a child possesses similar competence in both languages, and the latter when they have a higher level of proficiency in one language than in the other, usually in the mother tongue. Similar competence does not imply the ability to use the two languages equally for all functions and domains, as bilinguals rarely have similar competence in all topics and contexts. This will be further explained in the answer to question 5.

Finally, we can also distinguish between **additive and subtractive bilingualism**. The first occurs when children are bilingual in languages that are valued in the society they live in, and/or the acquisition of the second language is considered cultural enrichment. This is the case of children who learn English as an additional language in a country such as Spain because neither of the two languages is relegated to a secondary role or runs the risk of disappearing. However, when one of the languages is less valued than the other in the society the child lives in, subtractive bilingualism may arise. This means that the second language is acquired at the expense of competence in the first, something which may happen in the case of an immigrant child whose mother tongue is, for example, Turkish but who attends a German school in Germany. As a result, the child does not receive instruction in the first language at school. If, for whatever reason, the child doesn't receive enough stimuli in the first language at home either, the communicative competence in the first language may decrease little by little.

2

What are the personal, social, cultural and economic advantages of being bilingual?

Being bilingual or multilingual implies much more than simply the ability to use two or more languages as it offers many potential personal, social, cultural, economic and even cognitive advantages. At present, English is the dominant global language,

Knowing languages opens up many opportunities.

but being able to communicate in languages such as Chinese, Spanish or Arabic also offers advantages. In our globalised world, knowing two or more languages opens up many possibilities that do not exist for monolingual people. A high command of another language not only offers the **opportunity to study or work in countries where that language is spoken**, but also makes it possible **to understand the culture of foreign countries** when travelling. While a monolingual person can only communicate with those who speak the same language, bilinguals do not have this language barrier and are able to establish more meaningful relationships with people from other countries and cultures.

Being bilingual takes on special importance in **families where more than one language is spoken** because the parents each have a different native language. Many of these parents may feel the need to talk to their child in their first language. The relationship between a parent and child is so intimate and personal that parents feel more comfortable communicating in their native tongue. When there are grandparents or other relatives who only speak one of the languages that are used in those families, the bilingual child also has the chance of **establishing closer family connections** with these people if he/she speaks their language.



There are many cultural benefits of bilingualism as well. Knowing another language provides direct access to cultures where this language is spoken and, therefore, to a **wider cultural experience**. It may enable a better understanding and appreciation of different customs and ideas as well as **encourage greater tolerance**. This may not only take place through relationships with people who belong to these cultures, but also by **direct access to newspapers, the Internet, watching films in the original version or reading books in the language they were first written in**.

Moreover, bilingualism also results in professional and economic advantages. Being bilingual can **make a difference when applying for a job** because bilingual candidates are usually preferred. The majority of parents will be more or less aware of most of the personal, social, cultural and economic advantages mentioned above. However, they are probably less familiar with the fact that there are also some potential cognitive advantages for the bilingual child.

3 What are the cognitive advantages of being bilingual?

Cognition refers to mental activity such as thinking, understanding, learning and remembering. Until about 50 years ago, most studies on bilingualism suggested that **bilingualism caused mental confusion and had negative effects on the academic progress** of a child, because monolingual children obtained better results in intelligence tests than bilingual ones. Later it was found that these negative results were due to weaknesses in the methodological design of these studies. One of these weaknesses was that the bilingual children carried out the tests in their weaker language so that they were at a clear disadvantage compared to the monolingual children.

At the beginning of the 1960s, a study was carried out that had great impact because it compared monolingual children with balanced bilingual children, that is to say, children with a similar competence in both languages. The outcome showed

that the latter obtained **better results in both verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests**⁸. Since this study, a growing number of research projects has suggested that bilingual children may have **advantages when compared with monolingual children in some aspects of cognitive development** such as metalinguistic awareness, control of attention, divergent thinking or a greater communicative sensitivity.

Metalinguistic awareness

One of the first areas of research in which cognitive advantages for bilingual children were found was the domain of metalinguistic awareness, or, in other words, the ability to talk about and reflect upon language. Learning to do so plays an important role in the acquisition of reading and writing skills, and, as a result, in the future academic achievement of a child. Metalinguistic awareness can be divided into **the awareness or knowledge of sounds, words and grammar**. A child who is already able to divide words into syllables or who can say whether a sentence is grammatically correct or not is showing signs that they are acquiring this awareness. It is believed that bilingual children, in particular balanced bilinguals, may develop a greater metalinguistic awareness. Their need to deal with two languages makes them, unconsciously, pay more attention to how each language works as well as to the similarities and differences between them. One of the consequences of this seems to be that bilingual children **understand the arbitrary relationship between a word and its meaning sooner** than their monolingual peers. When they are asked questions such as *“Could you call a cow a dog and a dog a cow?”* bilingual children are able to answer affirmatively at a younger age⁹. The ability to do this is thought to be **positive for the development of both abstract and analytical thinking as well as for semantic development (learning the meaning of words and sentences)**.

Developing an awareness or knowledge of sounds is a **basic need when learning to read**. It seems that bilingual children only have a small advantage in simple tasks related to this area when they learn two languages with a similar phonological structure and alphabetic orthographic system. In one study, for

Bilingualism does not cause mental confusion.

A greater capacity to talk about and reflect upon language.

example, several 6- and 7-year-old children did some sound-recognition exercises¹⁰. Some of them were monolingual in English and others bilingual in English and Spanish or in English and Chinese. The study did not specify what the words were, but an example of this type of exercise would be to segment the word hat into three phonemes (/h/a/t/). The results were that the children who were bilingual in English and Spanish performed slightly better in determining the different phonemes in a word than the Chinese-English bilinguals. It cannot therefore be said that bilingual children have an overall advantage in the area of phonological awareness. However, [the phonological knowledge a child acquires in one of their languages may be very useful in the other](#). When the two languages are phonologically similar, this knowledge may help in learning to read in the other language. This means that [a child bilingual in English and Spanish would have this advantage, but a child bilingual in Chinese and English would not](#).

Control of attention

Another benefit of bilingualism that has been found in a large number of studies is an [increased control of attention](#) in tasks including competing or misleading information. In one of her studies, Ellen Bialystok, a leading researcher in the area of bilingualism and cognition, asked both bilingual and monolingual children to judge whether certain questions were grammatically correct or not, independently of their meaningfulness¹¹. The examples given were *Why is the dog barking so loudly?* (grammatical and meaningful), *Why the dog is barking so loudly?* (not grammatical, but meaningful) and *Why is the cat barking so loudly?* (grammatical but not meaningful). Answering these types of questions is not easy for a child. In the third sentence, for example, his or her attention might be focused on meaning, therefore not noticing that the sentence is grammatically correct. The bilingual children in the study were better at judging the grammaticality of the questions than the monolingual children. What is interesting to know is [that this superiority in attention control has not only been shown in linguistic tasks but also in nonverbal ones](#), e.g. mathematical tasks that require attention to certain data and not others. In

addition, this superior control of attention seems to last into adulthood



Divergent thinking

Among the different types of thinking that can be distinguished are convergent and divergent thinking. The first refers to the ability to give the one “correct” answer to standard questions that do not require significant creativity, i.e. providing the typical answers most people would give and that are based on common thought structures. Divergent thinking, on the other hand, refers to [a type of cognitive flexibility](#). It implies the ability to generate a great variety of novel and alternative responses to a given problem, something which suggests greater creativity and flexibility of thinking. This type of thinking can be investigated by asking questions such as *What are the possible uses for a brick?* A convergent thinker would probably provide obvious answers such as *building a house* or *building a wall*. However, a child with the capacity of divergent thinking may provide more original answers and might suggest that the brick could be used as *a bed for a doll*, *a magic brick* or as *a nutcracker*.

It is thought that bilingualism positively effects divergent

Greater capacity to adopt different perspectives.

thinking because a bilingual person has two linguistic systems and therefore two or more words to describe each element of the world they live in. This would lead to increased understanding that many events, objects, ideas, etc. can be seen from different perspectives and be interpreted in different ways. It has been suggested that this skill may be better developed if the bilingual's repertoire includes two very different languages. Moreover, most studies link better divergent thinking skills with balanced bilingualism, whereas the effects are less clear for bilinguals who are less competent in one language than the other.

Communicative sensitivity

Communicative sensitivity refers to the ability to perceive what is going on in a particular communication act; and being sensitive to the communicative needs and characteristics (e.g. age, intelligence, linguistic skills, visual or hearing impairments) of the other person, the listener. It is thought that bilinguals are more communicatively aware because they are used to adapting their language to the context in which they find themselves or to the person they are talking to. A child attending a French-English bilingual school in France needs to know that he or she has to speak, for example, English to some teachers at school but French to other people, such as the bus driver. When this child goes on holiday to the beach and meets a British child, he or she understands, and even finds it logical, that English, and not French, needs to be used to communicate with the other child.

The evidence that deaf children develop their communicative skills less skillfully or later than children without this impairment, made Genesee, Tucker and Lambert, renown researchers in the field of bilingualism, propose the hypothesis that in a linguistically enriched environment, as is the case in bilingual environments, these skills might be better developed¹². The researchers compared monolingual children from kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 2 with children attending schools with bilingual education programs. The children were asked to explain a game to two listeners, one of whom was blindfolded. There was no significant difference in the number of rules the children explained to them. However,

the children in the bilingual programs were more sensitive to the blindfolded person's need for more information about the materials that were to be used in the game. The results of the study confirmed the researchers' initial hypothesis and they concluded that bilingual children were more sensitive to the needs of the listeners because they seemed to be better able put themselves in the position of the person experiencing communication difficulties.



As we have seen so far, research on the cognitive effects of bilingualism that was conducted from the 1960s onwards produced different results than that carried out previously. On the other hand, it became clear that bilingualism did not have the same effect on all children exposed to two languages. This contradiction made Jim Cummins, an international authority in the fields of bilingualism and second language acquisition, examine the factors that caused these differences¹³. As a result of his research, Cummins developed the Threshold Hypothesis, which suggests a direct relationship between the competence children obtain in both languages and the potential cognitive advantages gained. However, this hypothesis has not been proven with certainty. There are researchers who have shown

Bilinguals are used to adapting their language to the context in which they find themselves.

that some of the positive effects of bilingualism may even appear in people who are still learning a second language..

4 Are there any disadvantages?

If we expect a bilingual person to show the abilities of two separate monolingual people, we shall see that he or she does not. However, any minor drawbacks seem unimportant when we consider a bilingual person to be a speaker with specific linguistic characteristics. But, what exactly are the disadvantages?

Smaller receptive vocabulary in each of the languages

When we compare bilingual children with monolinguals of the same age, the first sometimes know fewer words in each of their two languages. Bilingual children tend to know some words only in their first language, other words in their second language, while usually knowing the majority of words in both languages. The reason for this is that their experiences with the two languages and the words they use in these languages are different.

In the case of a child whose home-language is Dutch but who attends a Dutch-English bilingual school, some words will only be used in the home-context and others only in the school-context. However, the great majority of them will be used in both contexts, and therefore in both languages. This child will know a word such as *ear* ('oor' in Dutch) in both languages, whereas, initially, he or she will learn a word like *koekenpan* ('frying pan') only in the first language because that is the language in which this tool is referred to in the kitchen at home. On the other hand, at first he or she will learn the vocabulary related to a subject taught in English at school only in that language. Nevertheless, the sum of all the words bilingual children know in their two languages may often be greater than that of monolinguals.

Also, the conceptual knowledge of bilingual children is

similar to that of monolingual children. The only difference is that bilingual children may use words from their two languages for some concepts, whereas for others they may only use words from one of the languages. If the two languages are used regularly and children receive varied and rich language input, this less developed vocabulary will expand as they get older. When vocabulary acquisition is consciously stimulated at home or in demanding academic programs at school children quickly acquire a rich and wide vocabulary in both languages.

Lower reading fluency

Several studies on fluent reading, most of them carried out with adults, have shown that many bilinguals read more slowly in their weaker language. This is evident even in bilinguals whose oral fluency is native-like. Again, this limitation should just be seen as another characteristic of bilinguals. The fact that, as adults, bilinguals read more slowly in their weaker language should not worry parents of bilingual children since it ought to be considered a minor drawback or, as Bialystok puts it, "Not too bad a price for being able to read [in two languages]!"¹⁴ ..

5 Will my child be able to use the two languages equally?

Bilingualism can be considered from two different perspectives. The first is called the monolingual or fractional point of view and emphasises the importance of a high level of linguistic competence in both languages. The bilingual person is expected to demonstrate a proficiency comparable to that of monolinguals in each of the languages. In other words, the bilingual person is expected to be like two monolinguals in one. This idea is widespread and if someone is not able to use the two languages perfectly, equally well or just like a native speaker of these languages, he or she is often not considered to be a "true" bilingual. Even people who are in fact bilinguals would not label themselves as such. The main problem with this viewpoint is that the bilingual person is compared to

Initially, bilingual children may know fewer words in each of their two languages.

A slightly reduced reading fluency in the second language is not too bad a price for being able to read in two languages!

A bilingual person uses one language or the other depending on the situation, the topic or the person they are talking to.

Children who receive quality bilingual education will, eventually, be able to refer to most concepts in both of their languages.

a monolingual person and this does not quite seem fair. Bilinguals do not use their two languages in the same way as monolinguals use their single language.

At present, the vast majority of specialists in bilingualism adopt the holistic or bilingual point of view, which gives more importance to the use that is given to the two languages. In 1989, François Grosjean, the internationally recognised expert in bilingualism (see question 1), suggested that **bilingual people are 'specific speaker-hearers'**¹⁵. They hardly ever use their two languages in the same contexts, for the same purposes or with the same people. Bilinguals use either one language or the other depending on the situation, the topic or the person they are talking to. They may even use both of them together, a phenomenon which will be described in question 13. As a consequence, and because the needs are normally different for each language, the vast majority of bilinguals **tend to be stronger in different domains (the specific contexts in which a given language is used) in each of their languages.**

Let us consider the example of a child born in Italy in an Italian speaking family who attends a bilingual Italian-English school in Rome. For the sake of simplicity we reduce the language domains to five: home, family, friends, sports and school. The domain-specific vocabulary of home and family will be better developed in the mother tongue, because Italian is used to communicate at home. The domains of sports and friends may be covered in both languages at more or less the same level if the child speaks Italian with neighborhood friends while playing or doing sports, but English with classmates at school and maybe in the PE lessons too. However, the school vocabulary will be better developed in the language in which subjects are taught. If Geography is taught in Italian, the child may, initially, find it easier to talk about or explain concepts like *summit* or *slope* ('cima' y 'versante') in his or her native language. On the other hand, if Mathematics is taught in English it may be easier for the child to say that *2 multiplied by 4 makes 8* in English than in Italian. Yet, the concept of multiplying does not need to be relearned in Italian. The good news is that the child, eventually, will be able to refer to most of the concepts in both languages.

The exposure to a language as well as the need to use it determine, to a large extent, the competence that will be obtained.

One of the educational commitments of the European Union: citizens who are proficient in three languages.

Professor François Grosjean mentions the curious fact that doing sums, praying and remembering telephone numbers is usually limited to the language they were first learned in¹⁶. Therefore, the Italian-English bilingual child in our example may remember multiplication tables better in English but his or her house phone number in Italian.

Since the need to use the languages and the times when they are used are different for each of the languages, our Italian-English bilingual child may be more fluent in one domain in one language but more fluent in another domain in the other language. In addition, these **levels of fluency in the different domains may vary over time, depending on how, when and under which circumstances the languages are used.** When our Italian-English bilingual child grows up, he or she may prefer to read more in Italian or in English, study or find a job abroad, travel around the world, meet new friends or have a foreign boyfriend or girlfriend. Each of these circumstances may influence the balance and strength of the two languages. As Colin Baker, an internationally recognised expert on bilingualism and bilingual education, points out, **"The only certainty about a bilingual's future dual language use is uncertainty"**¹⁷. This should not be a cause for concern for parents. It is important for them to be aware that bilingual children are not two monolinguals in one, but speakers with their own characteristics. The breadth of vocabulary, expressions and structures they will know in each of their languages will reflect their exposure to them and how they are used. Creating opportunities for the child to talk, read or write in their two languages will help them achieve similar competence in both languages. Quality bilingual education will have this effect on their language competence.

6 Is it easier for a bilingual to learn a third language?

In many parts of the world more than two languages are used in everyday life. One of the educational commitments of the European Union is that EU citizen become proficient in three languages. **The acquisition of a third language by children can take place in a great variety of circumstances.** Children may

grow up with two languages because they live in a bilingual community and then learn a third, and sometimes even a fourth, language at school. Others are born in families where parents have different mother tongues, and these children usually acquire two languages from birth. When these families also live in a community or country where yet another language is spoken, it is not surprising that their children acquire three languages simultaneously. Moreover, in many monolingual families around the world, parents consider the knowledge of a second language essential but want their children to acquire a third language as well. As we can see, **knowing three languages is not unusual at all.**

In the last decade, the number of studies addressing trilingualism has increased significantly. What has become evident is that, **despite the similarities, there are also substantial differences between second and third language acquisition.** One of the distinctions between second and third language learning is related to the acquisition order. Whereas a second language can be acquired either simultaneously or successively, in the case of a third language there are four possibilities: the third language can be acquired simultaneously with the other two (Lx/Ly/Lz), two languages can be acquired from birth and the third afterwards (Lx/Ly → Lz), the second and third language can be learned simultaneously after the first language has been learned (Lx → Ly/Lz) or the three languages can be acquired consecutively (Lx Ly → Lz)¹⁸.

There is much less research available on simultaneous trilingualism than on simultaneous bilingualism, or even on successive trilingualism. Researcher and university professor Xiao-lei Wang has published an interesting study, called *Growing up with Three Languages: Birth to eleven*¹⁹. In it, Professor Wang analyses and comments on her own experience of raising trilingual children from birth. Research on early trilingualism suggests that it is not easy to become a balanced trilingual because there is always a dominant language and other weaker languages. It may be the case that parents who have a strong commitment to their children's trilingual education obtain better results. What seems evident is that, just **like bilinguals, trilinguals also need to be considered specific speaker-hearers.** One should

not expect them to be "three monolinguals in one".

As for successive third language learning, Jasone Cenoz, professor at the University of the Basque Country, and specialist in bilingual and multilingual education, points out that a substantial difference with respect to second language learning is that one already knows two languages instead of one²⁰. When acquiring the third language, a bilingual person can relate new structures, new vocabulary or new ways of expressing oneself to two languages instead of one (as would be the case with monolinguals). Moreover, bilinguals are **more experienced in language learning** and can employ all the skills and strategies they have acquired while learning the second language in the third language learning process. According to Humphrey Tonkin, a multilingual speaker of eight languages: "The art of language learning may lie not in the acquisition of an individual language but in mastery of the learning process itself"²¹.

Many studies indicate the increased likelihood that bilinguals can obtain higher general proficiency in a third language, although it is suggested that **other factors such as intelligence, socio-economic status, motivation, or exposure to the language also play an important role.** Studies that do not confirm this benefit for bilinguals are related to third language acquisition in subtractive bilingual contexts. As explained in question 1, subtractive bilingualism occurs when the second language is acquired at the expense of competence in the first, because a child does not receive instruction in the first language in any school subjects and does not receive enough stimuli in the first language at home either.

Studies carried out in the Basque Country and Catalonia have shown that bilingual students with a high level of competence in the two languages also obtain better results in the acquisition of a third language. Even though there are studies that do not confirm these results, there is reason to believe that **balanced bilingualism has a positive influence on third language learning.** It is in bilingual schools where balanced bilingualism is favoured.

The age at which a third language is acquired depends on the need to use the language. If a child is born in an environment where three languages are regularly used, he or she will have

Knowing more than one language helps to learn a new one.

more chances to develop the third language. For children who learn a third language at school or at a language school, it also depends on whether the methodology and didactics applied are appropriate for creating the need to use the language. [Learning a language at a younger age has many advantages if, as will be seen in the next question, it happens in a favourable context.](#) However, the final result has more to do with the need to use the language and the chances to be in contact with that language than the age at which acquisition begins.

7 What is the optimum age for starting with bilingual education?

It is often thought that there is a 'critical period' for learning a language, after which the ability to acquire a language is reduced or disappears. The idea of a critical period for language acquisition was first proposed at the end of the 1960s as a result of some studies with patients who had different kinds of injuries, strokes and other language impairments. Eric Lenneberg, a German linguist and neurologist, associated the loss of plasticity with the process of lateralization of brain functions. He put forward the Critical Period Hypothesis which claims that the ability to acquire human language is reduced in adolescence²². [This hypothesis is based on studies with children who had grown up isolated](#), either because they had been abandoned and grown up alone away from civilisation, or because they had been locked up and mistreated with hardly any contact with human beings. However, as a result of further studies, several authors suggested that these children were not only deprived of human contact but that they were most probably exposed to other hazards that may have influenced the results of the studies. It can, therefore, be said that there is inconclusive evidence of a critical period for the acquisition of the first language.

Although late first language acquisition is highly unusual, learning a language at a later age is not. People may start learning second languages at any age and many studies have addressed the question of whether there is critical or sensitive period for second language acquisition. It is generally thought that native-like levels of proficiency in a second or foreign language can

only be achieved if a start is made early in childhood. Many studies confirm this idea, but there are others which affirm that [native-like performance in late second language learners \(after the age of 12\) is not typical but that it should not be considered an exception either.](#) After a review of these latter studies, some authors have suggested that obtaining native-like mastery at an older age is possible in some linguistic aspects but not in all of them. This discussion brings us back to the question of whether bilinguals should be considered as two monolinguals in one person or not.

The fact that a person may or may not obtain native-like competence in a second language if he or she starts learning it during or after adolescence [does not imply that there is no optimum age for second language acquisition.](#) Many authors argue that there are more factors at work in the advantage that young children have when learning a new language. They do not support the idea of a critical period but argue that [there do exist factors that benefit early acquisition.](#) One of them would be the gradual decline in cognitive functions as one grows older. However, they reason that this does not happen at some moment during adolescence but little by little. For example, when acquiring a language at an early age, [it is easier to learn a list of vocabulary or irregular verbs or recall or evoke words and ideas.](#) On the other hand, children usually learn languages in a more relaxed and less demanding environment and through games. This implies that, often, they do not mind speaking even though they are not sure about what they need or should say. [Older learners may feel more inhibited to express themselves or embarrassed when they do not know how to say something.](#) When they do dare to say something, [the ideas or concepts are sometimes more complex than what they are able to express in the new language.](#) Often they also lack sufficient time or [motivation](#) to make the effort of learning a new language.

There is inconclusive evidence of a critical period for the acquisition of the first language.

For some authors it is possible to achieve native-like competence in a second language at a later age. Others believe it is only possible in some aspects of the new language but not in all of them.

There are many factors that benefit the early acquisition of a second language.



Richard Johnstone, Emeritus Professor at the University of Stirling, and principal advisor of the Bilingual Education Project of the British Council, mentions in one of his publications the advantages there are for early as well as for later language learning²³. Johnstone states that it is easier for young learners to learn native-like pronunciation and intonation. They are probably less anxious when learning a language than an older person and the younger they start, the more time there is available to learn the language. Starting at an early age favours making productive links between the first and second language, which may, in turn, benefit linguistic awareness and literacy skills. Moreover, children have the advantage of being able to complement intuitive processes with more analytical processes of language learning at a later stage and this may favour the acquisition of the new language.

However, each age has its own advantages and learning a second language at an older age may bring benefits as well. For example, while a child has to learn new concepts in both the languages, a teenager or adult can build on the knowledge they already have of their first language. Children need to learn how to tell the time both in the first and the second language but an older person already knows the concept and only needs to transfer it to the second language. They are more experienced in how to explain, describe, define or expose concepts or their ideas and this may help them when they need to communicate in the language they are learning. Moreover, they possess a

Each age has its own advantages for learning a new language. The advantage of early acquisition is that a child can first benefit from the advantages learning a language at a younger age brings, and later on from those typical of older learners.

wider range of learning techniques and strategies such as taking notes, highlighting, looking for reference materials or making comparisons. They are also more aware of the reasons why they are learning the language, and may, therefore, be better able to work towards their goals.

Is it then better to start learning a new language at a younger age? When the acquisition takes place under favourable circumstances it is advisable because of the many advantages it has. Moreover, the child will benefit not only from the advantages that come with learning a language at a younger age, but also complement their early language learning experience later on with the advantages mentioned for late language acquisition. However, it should not be taken for granted that starting at a young age is equal to success in learning an additional language without considering other aspects such as the amount and quality of the exposure, motivation, the teacher's competence and ability to apply age-appropriate methodologies, the continuity of the learning process or the need to use the second or foreign language. If all the conditions are favourable, language immersion from the age of three, as is done in the British Council School or in the Bilingual Education Project, is ideal because at that age children already have a basis in their mother tongue but have not yet started learning to read and write, something which may complicate the learning process. In these programmes, children learn to read and write simultaneously in both languages after having acquired an oral basis in both languages.

8

What is the process of becoming bilingual like?

Bilingual children may learn their two languages either simultaneously or successively. According to McLaughlin, author of many publications in the field of second languages and bilingualism, when children are introduced to the language before the age of three, they are thought to be simultaneous bilinguals, whereas if the child is older than three, bilingualism is referred to as successive²⁴. It is estimated that most children acquire their second language successively and only less than 20 percent does

More than 80% of bilingual children acquire the second language after the age of three.

it simultaneously. Neither way of becoming bilingual implies more success than the other, as the age of acquisition is just one factor among many in the process of becoming bilingual. **The rate at which children learn as well as the fluency level they may reach** depends on a variety of factors such as the quantity and the quality of the language input, the need and opportunities to use the language, as well as the role and attitude of the family and school.

The following table by McLaughlin, Blanchard and Osanai offers a typology of bilingual development based on the conditions of language exposure and the use of the second language by bilingual children²⁵.

A Typology of Bilingual Development Based on Conditions of Exposure and Use			
		Subsequent Experience	
		High opportunity/ motivation for use of both languages	Low opportunity/ motivation for use of one language
Prior experience	High exposure to both languages	Simultaneous Bilingualism (Type 1)	Receptive Bilingualism (Type 2)
	Low exposure to one language	Rapid Sequential Bilingualism (Type 3)	Slow Sequential Bilingualism (Type 4)

An example of a type 1 bilingual might be a child born into a family where each parent has a different native language and speaks their own language with his or her child. Type 2 may be the case of a young migrant child in Spain who hears Spanish on television and in the street, but uses, for example, only Arabic for everyday communication. Examples of type 3 and 4 bilinguals are children who learn the second or foreign language at school, the former being children who attend bilingual programmes and the latter those who learn English as a second language in ordinary language programmes. Although the latter are usually motivated, they do not have as many opportunities to use the language as type 3 children in bilingual programmes.

It is thought that **children who acquire two languages simultaneously go through the same developmental stages as those who only acquire their first language**. At certain times one language may become dominant because of the input they receive or because of the opportunities they have to use the language. After a period of early vocalisations, babies begin to repeat and produce syllables such as “da-da-da” or “ta-ta-ta” and continue with babbling until, between the ages of 12 and 18 months, they start producing one-word sentences. For example, children may say “down” when they sit down. When they want to drink something, they may point to a glass and say “water”. Some months later, around the age of 18 to 24 months, children start producing two-word utterances like “Paul water”, when the child is trying to say *Paul wants water*. Again, some months later, they enter the telegraphic stage in which they begin to use longer and more complex structures, for example, “Daddy like book”. Little by little they acquire the complex grammar of the language.

While the child is acquiring the language, it is normal that they make different types of mistakes. One of them is the phenomenon of overgeneralizing. This happens when a child is learning some rules and then applies these rules to irregular cases, e.g. *mens instead of men*. Also, they transfer the use or the meaning of some words to others. They may use the word *dog* for other four-legged animals or *kitty* only for the family pet but not for other cats. As we will see in the answer to question 13, children who are acquiring a second language may make the same type of errors a well. Although it may sometimes be feared that milestones, that is to say very important steps, in speech development may be delayed in the case of children who acquire two languages simultaneously, research has shown that this does not happen.

Children who start learning a second language in preschool (ages 3-5) have normally already developed the foundations of their first language. They already know many words, can use all the basic grammatical structures and have begun to learn when, where and with whom they should use certain language forms. When they start attending a bilingual school, children meet the challenge of another language with different vocabulary, other grammatical and morphological

Education at a school like the British Council School favors rapid sequential bilingualism.

Simultaneous bilingualism does not cause delay in language development.

rules and new forms of language and discourse. According to Tabors and Snow, renowned authors in the field of second language acquisition, for **children who learn a second language sequentially, language develops in a slightly different way**²⁶. The authors explain that these children go through four different stages:

- **First they try to use their home language.** When everybody around the child uses a different language, they have two options: either to speak the language they already know or to stop speaking altogether. Some children will continue to speak their home language for some time even though others do not understand what they are saying and they in turn do not understand what the others are saying. **Some children quite quickly realize that this does not work whereas other children will persist for months.**
- Next, they go through **the silent or nonverbal period.** Children realize that using their home language does not work and **enter a period during which they do not talk at all.** Nevertheless, normally, they do try to communicate but use nonverbal means; sometimes they cry to get attention or help, they point to an object they want or try to mime to get across what they want to say. This is a period of active language learning for the child since they are **busy unravelling the features, sounds, and words of the new language before they are able to use them themselves.** They observe others who use the new language and sometimes you can hear them repeat some words or sounds in a low voice. Depending on the child, this stage may last for a long time or be rather brief.
- The third period begins when **the child is ready to say his or her first phrases; the language they use is telegraphic and involves formulas.** Telegraphic speech is very similar to the language used by children who start talking in their first language. It is **very concise language, usually made up of just one or a few content words.** This is similar to what monolingual children do when they begin talking. For instance, a child might say “drink milk” indicating they want to drink some milk. Formulas, on the other hand, refer to **expressions that are always used in the same situations and, in using them, the child repeats what he or she has heard others say.** Initially, the child

may not even know the meaning, but has already noticed that it helped others in their context to achieve what they wanted. For example, children may say “I wanna play with the car”, because they have seen another child saying this, and as a consequence get the toy they wanted.

- Eventually, **they arrive at the production stage of productive language in the second language and begin to create their own utterances.** In the beginning, a child may combine very simple grammatical patterns such as “I do” with an object name, e.g. “I do a ice-cream”, but little by little they will gain control over the structures and vocabulary of the new language. During this period, children are experimenting with the new language and may say utterances like “you no my friend”. **The child will make many more mistakes because he or she no longer uses memorized phrases** but is figuring out how language works and developing an understanding of the new language.



As with any developmental sequence, the stages are flexible and not mutually exclusive. **A child may move into a new stage but not give up the earlier ones and sometimes return to a previous one.** Moreover, it should not be forgotten that each child requires a different amount of time to reach the productive stage

The process and the length of the process largely depend on the quantity and quality of the input received, as well as on the need to use the language.

in the second language. As we will see later, the process and the length of the process largely depend on the quantity and quality of the input received, as well as on the need children have to use the language.

9 Does bilingualism delay language acquisition?

At present there are no studies that show a relationship between growing up with two languages and delays or disorders in language acquisition. However, bilingual children do not use language in the same way as monolingual children, and **we should not, therefore, expect their language acquisition process to follow exactly the same pattern as that of monolinguals**. The rate of language acquisition is not the same for all bilingual children either. As mentioned previously, the rate varies, as it does for monolingual children.

In research on language acquisition, different parameters can be used to evaluate the rate of language acquisition, such as the length of utterances a child produces at a certain age, when certain structures appear in the child's language or the number of words available to the child at a given age. Monolingual children can be considered late talkers if they produce fewer than 50 words at 24 months. Although bilingual children may be slower at acquiring vocabulary, it does not seem to be the case that they fall outside the norms accepted for monolingual children. Since the rate of development of the two languages may differ, there is a chance that children may mix the two languages at a certain point in their development (this phenomenon will be further explained in question 13). It may also be the case that the acquisition of some specific constructions is advanced or delayed. **At certain moments, bilingual children may use grammatical structures from the language that is more developed while communicating the weaker language**. This occurrence was shown in a study with English, French and Italian children who were learning German as a second language²⁷. As word order in subordinate clauses is difficult in German, the bilingual children in the study made mistakes in this type of sentence because they adopted the

simpler rules from their first language when using subordinate clauses in German.

In another study which examined the morphosyntactic development (the set of elements and rules that allow constructing sentences) in bilingual children pupils from grade 2 and 5 were compared. Some of them were monolinguals in Spanish, others were bilingual in English and Spanish²⁸. The children had to decide whether some sentences 'sounded OK' and correct them if they thought they did not. For example, asking *Who do you think_ has green eyes?* is correct in English, but *Who do you think that has green eyes?* is not. However, in Spanish *¿Quién piensas_ tiene ojos verdes?* is not correct, but *¿Quién piensas que tiene ojos verdes?* is. Monolingual children performed better than the bilinguals in the test but these differences were greater in grade 2 than in grade 5. The researchers concluded that both monolingual and bilingual children go through the same stages but that bilingual children need more time to discover the patterns in each of their languages. What is important is that the study showed that the differences disappeared when the children had had enough exposure to the new language to allow them to discover the structures, and that **there is no evidence that bilingual children develop their languages in a different way from monolinguals**.

Bilingualism is not related to any delays or disorders in language acquisition.

Bilingual children need more time than monolingual children to discover the rules in their two languages. This difference disappears after a brief period of time.



Yet another study found that it takes bilingual children longer to learn irregular forms of a language²⁹. Regular forms, such as the past of the English verb 'work' (work-worked) are learned as part of a grammatical rule. However, irregular forms like in the verb 'go' (go-went) need to be learned as part of the lexicon and this may be related to how often the child hears those words. As has been explained previously, [children often over-generalise rules when learning a language](#). Therefore, in English they may say goed instead of went. The authors of this study noted that it takes bilingual children a bit longer to acquire the irregular forms of the language, but, just as in the study mentioned before, they also suggest that [this difference decreases with time](#). They also highlight the importance of literacy in acquiring irregular forms and refer to the positive effect of the quantity and variety of language that is used when talking to a child.

It seems that an initial delay in bilingual children's acquisition of certain structures is because the children have less contact with each of the languages. Whereas a monolingual child is in

contact with his or her language 100% of the time, a bilingual child might only be in contact with one language 50% of the time and 50% with the other. This slight delay has also been observed in vocabulary development.

[The rate of language development is related to the quality and quantity of contact with the language](#). This is not only the case in bilingual children but also in children who grow up with only one language. Studies of monolingual children have shown that child-directed speech is not the same for children who grow up in a low socio-educational context as it is for those who come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. The result, for those in a low socio-economic context, is a slower development of their vocabulary.

10

Can children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) become successfully bilingual?

[Specific Language Impairment \(SLI\) implies a significant disorder in the onset and development of language](#). It is often thought that bilingual education is not an option for children with speech impairment or a delay in language acquisition. It is argued that if acquiring one language is already problematic for these children, learning two might be even harder. When a child who is being raised with two languages at home is diagnosed with specific language impairment, parents are often advised to use only one language. However, according to researcher and speech therapist Suzanne Döpke, bilingualism does not cause any type of language disorder and using just one language again does not have a positive effect on language disorders³⁰.

[Lexical, morphosyntactic and discourse-pragmatic abilities of children with SLI are lower than those of children with Typical Language Development \(TLD\) of the same age](#). One of the characteristics of monolingual children with SLI that has been most frequently reported is that they have [difficulties in acquiring finite verb morphology](#). This characteristic is considered to be [one of the clinical markers for SLI](#). Some examples of this difficulty for English-speaking children are the ending of the [third person](#)

Bilingualism does not cause any type of language disorder, and just using one language again does not have a positive effect on language disorders.

singular verbs in the present tense (He plays) or the –ed ending of the regular past. Children with the disorder frequently omit these grammatical morphemes.

Johanne Paradis and Martha Crago, internationally renowned experts in the field of language acquisition, compared the use of morphosyntax within three groups of children: 1) monolinguals with SLI, 2) bilinguals with TLD and 3) monolingual children with TLD³¹. They found that the first two groups showed lower accuracy rates in some grammatical morphemes than the monolingual children with TLD of the same age. This means that this aspect of language is quite similar for both monolingual children with SLI and bilingual children with TLD. Other studies have also confirmed this finding. Due to these results, the authors suggest that the difficulty in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes should not be taken as a clinical marker for diagnosing SLI in bilingual children. Delay in the acquisition of these morphemes could simply be related to the child's bilingualism and may have nothing to do with suspected Specific Language Impairment.

An interesting question is whether these similarities in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes occur only in the initial stages of second language acquisition. A study carried out with a small sample of children suggests that the differences decrease over time. This could imply that a delay in the use of these morphemes only appears in the first stages of second language acquisition, but not later on³². It is suggested that bilingual children should only be diagnosed with SLI if they are impaired in both languages.

Contrary to the general fear of parents, bilingualism does not seem to cause “double delay” in language acquisition of children with SLI; one because of the impairment and the other because it is more difficult for them to acquire two languages. Studies with both bilingual and monolingual children with the impairment have shown that bilingual children with SLI do not exhibit greater delay in the use of grammatical morphemes than monolingual peers. Sometimes, their language development is even better. It has been suggested that this is due to the fact that bilingual children can use their knowledge of the two languages.

The difficulty in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes should not be taken as a clinical marker for diagnosing SLI in bilingual children.

The context in which a child acquires the second language is a relevant variable when deciding whether bilingual education is an option for a child with SLI. According to studies on grammar acquisition in bilingual children with SLI, it seems there is no reason to advise against bilingual education. However, it must be said that some of these studies were carried out in the bilingual area of Canada. As a result, the children lived within a bilingual community with the resulting exposure to both languages. On the other hand, in some studies carried out on immigrant children, bilingual in Turkish and Dutch, significant differences were found between bilingual children with SLI and monolingual children with SLI. An explanation for these contradictory findings might be found in the different social contexts of the children. Becoming bilingual may therefore be possible for children with SLI in a supportive context but not if the context is not favourable. In favourable circumstances, children with SLI can also acquire two languages. However, parents and professionals alike should evaluate whether the circumstances are appropriate.

Finally, it is important to mention that experts warn against the use of standardised tests normed with monolingual children to identify SLI in bilingual children. The reason for this is the overlap in linguistic characteristics between the two groups. More research is still required on how to diagnose the impairment in bilingual children. When parents want or need to see a specialist, it is advisable that they contact a professional who is also familiar with bilingualism.

In favourable circumstances, bilingual education may also be an option for children with SLI.

11

How important is the development of the first language?

In question 3 the relationship between the development of the two languages and potential cognitive advantages was already mentioned. The discussion of the importance of the first language dates back to research carried out on the difference in academic achievement among children who were schooled in a second language. Not all children seemed to acquire the second

language as easily or obtain the same advantages from the fact of being bilingual. According to Jim Cummins, these differences are due to the interaction between the first and the second language. He explained this by means of the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis³³.

The developmental interdependence hypothesis

According to this hypothesis, the level of competence in the second language (L2) that a bilingual child attains is partially dependent on the type of competence the child has developed in the first language (L1) when he or she starts intensive exposure to the L2. Cummins claimed that when the child's linguistic environment outside the school favors conceptual and vocabulary development, it is more likely that intensive exposure to the second language leads to high competence in that language without compromising the development of the first language. On the other hand, if a child's competence in the L1 is not sufficiently developed, extensive exposure to the second language in the early years of schooling may affect further development of the L1, as well as limit the development of the L2.

When a child's parents or caretakers have time to tell stories or discuss a variety of topics or issues with the child, he or she will develop the vocabulary and concepts in the L1 better, and be more prepared for the school language. In a study with bilingual Hispanic children in Miami, Vivian Umbel and Kimbrough Oller, researchers in psychology and the field of language acquisition, found that the children's vocabulary development in Spanish was the strongest predictor of their vocabulary development in English³⁴. They concluded that this result was consistent with Jim Cummins's Interdependence Hypothesis.

Enhanced conceptual and vocabulary development in the first language favors children's academic achievement because knowledge and thinking skills that have been acquired in the mother tongue are transferred to the second language. Moreover, this transfer takes place in the other direction as



well. What children learn in their second language at school is transferred to the first language and vice versa. For example, when a child learns how to tell the time in one language and, consequently, understands the concept of telling the time, there is no need to relearn this concept in the other language since it can be transferred. The child only needs to learn the words or structures to express the same concept in the other language. The same will happen when the child needs to learn higher academic or linguistic skills in further stages of education.

Several studies have highlighted the correlation between L1 and L2 reading skills. The experience and support children have in the home context highly influence their literacy acquisition. Learning to speak and read are social activities where children learn language through interactions with others, in particular with their parents. Early experiences, for example, with picture books and storytelling, prepare children for learning to read later on. The linguistic experience children have at home also helps them to use certain registers in their languages, as was shown in the following study³⁵: a group of children in an English-French bilingual programme at school were asked to tell a story with the help of some pictures. All of

Enhanced conceptual and vocabulary development in the mother tongue favors the child's academic achievement in the foreign language.

Learning to speak and read are social activities where children learn language through interactions with others, in particular with their parents.

them had had the same exposure to storytelling in French (their second language) at school, but what made the difference was their experience with storytelling at home in their first language. The children who had had more experience with storytelling at home were better able to tell the story in their first language.

As we can deduce from the above, [mother tongue development is extremely important for the personal and educational development of the bilingual child](#). In the answer to question 17, ideas and suggestions will be provided on how to help the child to develop their mother tongue in the family context.

12 Is it normal that my child refuses to speak one of the languages?

Refusal or reluctance to use one of the languages at certain times is not uncommon in bilingual children and should be distinguished from the nonverbal period children may go through when they start with bilingual education at preschool or school. [When children find themselves in a social situation, e.g. a bilingual school, in which they cannot use their home language, initially they may not talk at all for some time](#). Depending on the child, this period may last a few weeks or several months. During this nonverbal period they try to use nonverbal means of communication. They may cry to attract attention, point at objects they want to have or show an object if they want to know the name. Also, they will observe others and pay attention to what they say in the other language. They will quietly try out sounds and words they have heard, and attempt to find out the meaning of words and structures of the new language. For example, a child who is playing with a classmate and hears the teacher say “Look at that toy car” may quietly repeat “toy car”. After the nonverbal period, children, little by little, dare to use their new language. It seems logical that parents want to find out for themselves how well the child is progressing by asking him or her to speak in the “school language” to them. The child will probably be reluctant to say anything, and even more so when asked to do so in front of others. Children usually do not want to be made an exhibition of by being asked to show what they are already able to say in

At certain moments, bilingual children may be reluctant to use one of their languages.

their new language. Parents should not force children to speak in their L2, as there will certainly be other more natural occasions, for example, at events organised by the school, when the child's progress can be observed.

[For most children who learn two languages simultaneously at home, there will also be moments when they refuse to use one of them. They may even reject it](#). Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert, an author, researcher and mother of three bilingual children who has published two books about the experiences of bilingual families, mentions several language strategies children may use when they do not want to use a particular language³⁶:

- In conversations the child refuses to speak a particular language and only answers back in the other one.
- The child ignores people or leaves the room when a certain language is being used.
- He or she prefers to use non-verbal communication such as gestures or mimes.
- The child reduces language use to single-word responses such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’.
- The child simply repeats what is said to him or her, without making any effort to respond or re-phrase the sentence.
- The child interrupts conversations in a particular language by talking about another topic or subject and switching to the other language.

The author explains that children may use these strategies for several reasons. One of them may be a lack of vocabulary and here parents can help the child by providing more input. Another could be that the child is just rebellious. Just like any other child of the same age, he or she may have tantrums and shout when they do not get what they want. However, in the case of a bilingual child there is another tool they may use, that of refusing to use a certain language. Also, the child may feel embarrassed when one of the parents speaks a language to them in front of other people who don't speak that language, and then try to avoid using the language themselves when they are, for example, with friends.

[When a child refuses to speak one of the languages](#), parents should not change their own language behaviour and continue talking to the child as they have done so far. [Parents](#)

Children usually do not want to be made an exhibition of. They should not be forced to publicly show their progress in the new language.

may pretend they do not understand what the child is saying and 'force' him or her to use the other language. However, this should be done tactfully and skilfully without bringing about the feeling that language is a matter of imposition and without interrupting the conversation. Parents can **take longer to reply** when the child asks something in the undesired language and answer more quickly when he or she does so in the "correct" language. Another option is to **rephrase what the child says** or **ask questions to confirm what he or she has just said**.

However, it is better to influence the child's language use by creating more opportunities for the use of that particular language. Maybe one can buy new reading material and read with the child, watch videos or listen and sing different songs together. If possible, parents can also try to increase contact with monolingual speakers of the language. If a child just gives 'yes' or 'no' answers, parents may **try to ask more open questions**, for example, instead of asking "Do you want a sandwich?", the parent can ask whether the child wants a sandwich or fruit and then ask what they want on their sandwich or what type of fruit they want. In this way they encourage the child to talk more in the other language.

Una Cunningham-Andersson and Stefan Andersson, authors of a practical guide on how to bring up children with two languages from birth, mention 3 strategies that can be used **when a child does not want to speak one of the languages in front of other people**, for example, when his friends are present: (1) **saying everything twice, once in each language**, (2) **speaking only one language and letting the child** or a friend who speaks the same language **translate** and (3) **speaking only the language all the children understand**³⁷. The problem with the last option is that the child may become reluctant to use the parents' L1 at all. It is important to explain to the child why his father or mother wants him or her to use their language. Maybe parents can also try to explain this to the child's playmates, and the child can teach his friends some words when they come over to play. Letting the child spend more time with monolingual speakers of the language may also help him or her to overcome their reluctance. **The objective is to increase the need and motivation to use the parents' L1 and praise the child when he or she does**

When a child is reluctant to speak a language, it is useful to create opportunities for the use of that particular language.

so.



13 Is it normal that my child mixes the two languages?

The fact that children mix their two languages is something that often worries parents of bilingual children. It is often thought to be the result of a lack of fluency in the two languages or a sign of laziness. However, mixing two languages, or code-mixing, is a characteristic of bilingual speech. It is not only children that do this, but also adult bilinguals.

There are several so-called **language-contact phenomena** that can be observed in the language used by bilinguals. These phenomena have been defined in many different ways by authors writing on the topic. In this guide we will follow the distinctions between code-switching, borrowing, interference and transfer as made by François Grosjean³⁸. We speak of code-switching when a speaker changes from one language to another to say a word, phrase or sentence and then reverts back to the first language. A Spanish-English bilingual might, for example, say "I want café" ("quiero café"/ "I want some coffee"). Borrowing occurs when a bilingual brings in a word or short expression from the other

Mixing two languages is a characteristic of bilingual speech.

language he or she knows and adapts it morphologically and/or phonologically to the other language like in “Lo voy a locar” (“Lo voy a cerrar”/ “I’m going to lock it”). When there are permanent, or relatively permanent, traces of one language in the other -for example, having a foreign accent in another language- François Grosjean calls it transfer. Interferences, on the other hand, refer to “ephemeral intrusions” of one language into the other. An example of this would be using an English word with, say, Spanish pronunciation.

When a bilingual person talks to another person, they may function in monolingual or bilingual mode.

In order to understand these contact phenomena it is essential to explain what François Grosjean calls the **bilingual’s speech modes**³⁹. According to Grosjean, a bilingual person can function in **monolingual** or **bilingual mode**. These modes need to be considered as a continuum: the monolingual mode at one end and the bilingual mode at the other, but with intermediate modes between the two endpoints.

This means that **when a bilingual person communicates with other people, they have to decide which language to use**. Normally this happens subconsciously and depends on the particular communicative situation bilinguals find themselves in. If the interlocutor only speaks one of their languages, the speaker will choose the one they have in common, but if the other person also knows the two languages, speakers may ‘mix’ them. This mixing does not happen randomly as there seem to be grammatical constraints that determine when a construction is unacceptable or strange.

Whereas for some people mixing their languages is normal, others hardly mix them.

In the bilingual mode all the contact phenomena mentioned may happen, whereas in the monolingual mode code-switching and borrowing are rare. These two phenomena are present in the bilingual mode because when bilinguals speak to other bilinguals they may feel that certain notions and concepts are better expressed in the other language. Since the other person understands both languages, bilinguals allow themselves to mix languages. Another reason for switching or mixing codes may be that, at a certain moment, they do not know or remember a word or expression in the language they are using, or because they want to report the exact words someone said. Also, bilinguals may use code-switching or borrowing as a communicative or social

strategy, for example, to show they know the other language or as a sign of belonging to a certain group. For some bilinguals, code-switching is normal or familiar because it is frequently done in their linguistic environment. Others, on the other hand, hardly code-mix because they are very careful about their language use. This may be the case of a teacher at a bilingual school or a parent who does not want his or her child to code-mix.



Language mixing in children who are still acquiring a second language

Parents may doubt whether their child mixes as a result of the special characteristics of bilingual speech or because the child is not able to use each language correctly. The discussion about language mixing in children is related to two opposing theories about the storage in the brain of the two languages in early bilinguals. The first of these explanations holds that a bilingual child initially does not discriminate between the two language systems but that these gradually become separated around the age of three. The other theory holds that bilingual children develop two separate linguistic systems from a very early age.

When they are learning their second language, children may mix their two languages because they still have gaps in their linguistic knowledge.

It may take some time until children learn when it is acceptable to mix two languages and when it is not.

At present, researchers generally agree on the second theory, and two alternative explanations have been provided for language mixing in children who are still acquiring their second language. The first one proposes that young bilingual children mix their languages because other bilinguals frequently code-mix when they address the child, or because they are tolerant when the child does so. The other explanation, supported by substantial evidence, is that young bilingual children mix their languages due to gaps in their proficiency. As has already been explained, both simultaneous and successive bilingual children may be dominant in one of their languages. *It seems that children mix more in their weaker language than in their stronger one*, and that they use syntactic structures from the stronger language in the weaker one when they still do not know or are not sure of them in the latter. In children who learn their two languages successively, language dominance is even more normal when they start learning the second language since their first language has been present since the onset of language acquisition.

It is important to consider these different forms of language mixing in children as strategies that they resort to in order to use the weaker language. Moreover, as we have seen previously, children who are acquiring their first language also make mistakes. *As they grow older and learn more equivalent vocabulary in both languages, and progress in both of them in general, the phenomenon of mixing the two languages will decrease*. It is advisable not to criticize them for mixing since this may inhibit the child or cause anxiety about using the two languages.

As has already been explained, code-switching (saying a word, a phrase or sentence in one language and then returning to the other) and borrowing (bringing in a word or short expression from the other language adapting it morphologically or phonologically into that language) normally only happens in the bilingual mode when the bilinguals choose to do so for certain reasons. Children usually code-switch only when they know the other person can understand what they are saying and when they believe it is acceptable. However, it may take some time before bilingual children control code-switching. As soon as they become more balanced in their two languages, children will be better able

to separate the two languages and only mix for the same reasons as bilingual adults. When a child mixes the two languages, a parent can accept it, or they can encourage use of the weaker language; it depends on the parent's own attitude towards mixing. In any case, *fostering regular contact with monolingual speakers is important because it will help the children to develop their ability to use the monolingual and the bilingual speech modes* as well as to learn how to modify their language to the people they are talking with.

14 At what age can we establish that a child is bilingual?

In question 8 we saw that children go through four different stages when they start learning a second language at school. While they are going through these stages, *in kindergarten and the first grades of primary education, children develop the kind of language they need to communicate in everyday social life*. They do so in cognitively undemanding contexts in which their teachers help them to understand the second language with the help of visual aids, a lot of high-frequency words and with the support of facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures. However, the language that is used while playing with friends is not the same as the one needed to process complex concepts inside the classroom.

Children also need to acquire academic language *in order to learn subjects* in higher grades -*a much more demanding language context* that requires the ability to analyse, synthesize, evaluate, etc. Little by little, and throughout the different grades, children will develop this type of register in both languages. Gradually, they will learn to understand and talk about subject content in the same way as in their mother tongue. The age at which we can establish that a child is bilingual depends on factors such as the quantity and quality of exposure to the second language, the competence and skill of the child's teachers, the continuity of the learning process and the opportunities a child has to use the second language.

Student achievement in the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport 'Bilingual Education Project' (BEP)

In 2010 an evaluation study of the Bilingual Education Project launched by the Spanish Ministry of Education in collaboration with the British Council in 1996, was published. In this project students receive approximately 40% of their tuition in English.

The report, which is available online, states that at the level of Infant education and in the first two years of Primary education, students communicate mainly through language chunks or memorized phrases, but that their pronunciation is good, as is their understanding of spoken language. In their second year of Primary Education students start studying Science in English. At this time, they begin to understand and complete the longer and more complex structures their teachers use, while also developing an ability to produce longer answers themselves. Their vocabulary increases significantly with the incorporation of the specific vocabulary of Science.

Students in the fifth and sixth year of Primary education are able to participate in class, and show a good command of both vocabulary and linguistic structures in English. The mistakes they make can be attributed to the fact that they are still developing their competence in the second language. The study shows that they seem to be able to follow the teacher easily and understand the lesson content. [High achievers in sixth year are generally able to communicate orally in English with fluency, precision and coherence.](#) Students in the lower bands of achievement communicate at a basic level, but show good oral comprehension skills. Writing tests carried out in the sixth year of Primary education, saw students divide into three groups: [High-performance students with an excellent writing competence under timed conditions](#); middle-level performing students who demonstrate an acceptable level of writing ability and those with a lower level of ability who occasionally write with adequate levels of accuracy and using appropriate lexis, but lack the knowledge and skills to be able to write a narrative without help.

Students in the second year of Secondary Education were tested on their ability to write in Spanish and the results com-

pared to those of students who were not part of the BEP and who therefore received their whole education in Spanish. The study concludes that "the performance of the students in the BEP groups was clearly stronger than that of those in the non-BEB groups". The fact of studying in a bilingual school was not detrimental to the development of their literacy skills in their mother tongue. It may even be argued that it was beneficial, although it is difficult to compare the groups too closely in this case as students in the BEP at Secondary level may have been through a selection process whereas the non-BEP groups had not and may have been more mixed in ability.

Student achievement at the British Council School

At the British Council school in Madrid the UK National Curriculum is followed, and 80% of instruction is in English. Children enter the school at the age of 3, and from this age on they are taught by British teachers (or teachers with British qualifications) whose mother tongue is English. Pupils only communicate with their teachers in English. We can thus consider this [complete language immersion inside the classroom](#). Through this model children are able to understand what their teachers say in English after just a few months, although they normally answer back in their mother tongue. Gradually, children start to use words and at the end of the first year they already construct phrases. Normally, children at the British Council School are able to speak without difficulty when they reach Year 1, at the age of 5 or 6. In Primary Education, pupils at the British Council School take [the British NFER and SAT exams](#), which include different level tests for reading, writing and mathematics, obtaining similar or even better results than pupils schooled in the UK.

The IGCSE exams

The Cambridge IGCSEs (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) are exams which are recognised globally as evidence of academic ability. Pupils can be awarded grades A* to G (A* being the highest grade) and can take any combination of subjects.

When the Children at the British Council School usually speak English without difficulty when they reach Year 1.

BEP Students and the IGCSEs

In 2009, students from the BEP sat IGCSE exams for the first time. 1,447 year 11 students from 36 schools mostly sat 3 IGCSEs each, though some took more. The results were positive and demonstrated that these BEP students were more than capable of passing exams in English which required a high level of subject knowledge.

Students who took the English as a Second Language IGCSE achieved good results, while the results of those taking the IGCSE First Language English were satisfactory. Results in the First Language Spanish IGCSE were excellent across the board.



Pupils at the British Council School and the IGCSE exams

Pupils at the British Council School take a greater number of IGCSE exams than those at most schools in the UK. They obtain **excellent grades** despite sitting an average of 10 exams. Throughout the years, British Council School pupils have even received **Top in the World awards in different subjects**. These excellent academic results in exams taken in English do not affect pupils' development in their mother tongue, as is evident from the also **outstanding results of the pupils in the PAU** (Spanish university entrance exams). The average mark in 2014 was 7.73/10.

IGCSE: Results 2014

- Pass-rate of 100%
- 93% of marks were between grades A* to C
- 56% of marks were between grades A* or A
- 2 students received the highest marks possible: 10 passes at A*
- 4 students received 9 passes at A* and another student received 8 passes at A*

15

Once my child is bilingual, what is the risk of losing the second language if it is not used frequently?

With the adequate amount and quality of exposure, motivation as well as continuity in the learning process either in the home or school context, children can become bilingual without experiencing major difficulties. However, the possibility that a child reverts back to monolingualism also exists. **Languages develop according to the need to use a specific language**. If this need is not present anymore, people will no longer use the language and there is a strong possibility of a language being forgotten. The linguist Werner Leopold did a case study of the language development in his bilingual daughter Hildegard who acquired two languages simultaneously⁴¹. Leopold lived with his family in the United States of America and he spoke German to his daughter while his wife spoke English to her. Until the age of 5, English was Hildegard's dominant language. However, when the family temporarily moved to Germany, in a period of only four weeks the child was not able to produce more than a few simple utterances in English and only spoke German. When they moved back to the USA, English became her dominant language again and German the weaker one.

According to Jim Cummins, children who only receive education in their second language at school may also lose the ability to use their mother tongue in a period of two to three years, even though they are still able to understand the language⁴². If children feel they need to use the language, either at home or at school, to communicate with relatives, friends or simply to watch TV or read a book, they will develop or maintain the language. However, if the need disappears it is quite possible

Some pupils from the British Council School have received Top in the World awards for the IGCSE exams.

When the need to use a language disappears, the language may be forgotten.

that the language will be forgotten little by little. The good news is that if, for some reason, the need to use the language appears again, the language can be revived quite quickly under favorable conditions.

16 What language(s) should be used at home?

Parents may have different reasons why they ask themselves what language(s) to use at home. Some parents have different mother tongues and each parent wishes to speak their own first language with the child. They may have relatives abroad who only speak one of the languages and want to favor communication between the child and those relatives. Other parents may already have taken the decision to send their child to a bilingual school in the future and would like to prepare the child for the day he or she starts school. Again, other parents may already have a child in a bilingual school and want to know if it is necessary or advisable to provide their child support in the second language by using that language at home. Finally, parents may be considering the possibility of introducing a third language at home.

There is a lot of practical advice available on the topic of using more than one language in the home context, but there is no “best” course of action. **Each family has its own unique set of circumstances, and what might be sensible for one family may not be suitable for another.** What is important is that in order to become bilingual, a child needs to be exposed to the language and use it. This means that the child needs to be in contact with the particular language for a substantial amount of time.

Once parents have obtained the relevant information about the possibilities or strategies, they **need to make a conscious decision about what makes most sense in their own particular family and specific context.** Thinking ahead can make the whole process easier since it allows parents to anticipate any potential problems and to consider the different options to provide additional support to their child.

Each family needs to decide which strategy makes most sense in their own particular family context.



In the case of a monolingual family, obviously, no choice concerning the use of languages at home needs to be made. However, parents can still help their bilingual child with the language. As has already been explained in previous answers, the development of the mother tongue plays an extremely important role in the personal and academic development of a (future) bilingual child. At home, monolingual parents can help their child with the development of vocabulary and concepts not only in the mother tongue, but also with the ones acquired in the school language. Any help the child receives will allow him or her to transfer knowledge from one language to the other. Ideas and suggestions on how to give support will be given in the answer to question 17.

There are monolingual parents who speak a foreign language to their child from an early age. In principle there is nothing to be said against doing so, provided the parents' language level is high enough (as has been explained throughout this guide, **the quality and quantity of the input children receive is extremely important**). However, it should not be forgotten that language in general, and the language we choose to speak, is closely related to affectivity. Expressing oneself and establishing a close relationship with our

Language in general, and the language we choose to speak, is closely related to affectivity.

child using a foreign language may not be that easy, so there is a danger that it may become difficult to build a good affective relationship. We should be aware that [the relationship with our baby is established by means of a special type of highly affective language](#) in which rhymes, songs and domestic language play an important role. Parents probably only know this type of language in their own mother tongue. [Using a language which is not the mother tongue in these types of relationships may be unnatural.](#)

Below, different options or strategies for using different languages in a bilingual context at home will be explained.

The one-person-one language approach

In this approach [each parent uses a different language to communicate with the child](#). When speaking to each other, the parents use a) either language, or b) the language they speak to the child in. This is the best known approach in the case of families with parents who have different mother tongues. For François Grosjean, [this strategy works well when young children spend most of their time with their parents](#)⁴³. However, when they get older, they will have more and more contact with the outside world and use the language that is not used in the surrounding environment (if that is the case) less.

Studies carried out involving this strategy have shown that [children do not always receive the necessary exposure and input in the two languages](#). In particular, this is the case if one of the two languages is not spoken in the surrounding community. This is what was seen, for example, in a study carried out in Belgium by Annick de Houwer, a psycholinguist, sociolinguist, and expert in bilingualism⁴⁴. Dutch is spoken in the Flemish part of Belgium. The author found that for children from families in which both Dutch (L1) and another language (L2) were spoken, there was a one in four chance that the child would end up not speaking the second language. This happened if one parent used only Dutch and the other only the other language (L2). The reason for this lies in the fact that these children often did not receive enough exposure to the second language. They use the language with one of the parents, but not in their other daily contexts. The results were even stronger when the parent who spoke the second language,

besides using the L2 also used Dutch (L1) at home. However, when both parents used the L2 at home and only one of them also used Dutch, more than 90% of the children spoke both languages. This last situation provides children with many more opportunities to hear and use the second language. Despite the positive effect of both parents using both languages on a child's proficiency in the L2, [the one person-one language strategy may be effective for children who attend a bilingual school](#) since the two languages are used there anyway.

[When one of the parents speaks yet another language \(L3\) and they want their child to acquire this language, the one person-one language strategy can also be adopted](#). Let's consider the case of a Spanish child: Marcos. Marcos lives in Spain. He attends a Spanish-English bilingual school, where he speaks both these languages. At home, his parents speak to him in Spanish and French. Here, [the question of how to guarantee enough quantity and quality of exposure and input in each of the languages needs to be taken into account](#). As previously mentioned, it is not likely that children obtain balanced or equal competence in their three languages.

The home-outside the home strategy

This strategy implies that [one language is used at home and the other outside the home where the community speaks another language](#). Several experts recommend this option. The [inconvenience](#) of this strategy may be that [one of the parents has to speak a language which is not his or her native language at home](#). Moreover, children will need reinforcement of the home language when they grow older because they will spend more time outside the home and without their parents.

For the Spanish child living in Spain who attends a Spanish-English bilingual school and whose parents speak both Spanish and English, either Spanish or English would be the home language in the home-outside the home strategy. If Spanish is the choice, the situation is exactly the same as in Spanish monolingual families. If English is the choice, there would be no problem as long as enough quantity and quality of input and exposure to Spanish is guaranteed in the initial stages, and, as the child grows

One person-one language may be a good strategy for families with children who attend a bilingual school.

older and spends more time outside the home, enough quantity and the quality of the input in English is also guaranteed.

If a third language other than Spanish or English is used at home (L3), the child will learn this third language at home, Spanish both outside home and at school and English at school. Again, the level of proficiency that a child acquires in each of the three languages will depend on the amount of instruction received at school in each of the languages and the exposure and/or reinforcement that can be provided to the child in the languages.

Language-time or time and place strategy

Another possible strategy is to use a single language at a **specific time, place, or for a specific activity**. For example, one language is spoken in the morning, during the first half of the week, at the grandparents' house or around the dining table. The other is used in the afternoon, during the second half of the week, the weekend or while doing a particular activity. This approach works well in school contexts where some subjects are taught in the mother tongue and others in the second language. However, it is more complicated to handle at home. Using it in the family context requires strict control and organisation to keep the use of the different languages separate.

However, it **may be an option for families with a child attending a bilingual school**. If they speak the second language with relative ease, parents may **choose a specific moment or activity to speak the language with their child**. For example, when they are in the kitchen at snack time or in the car while taking the child to an after-school activity. The advantage of doing this is that they can follow the child's language development in the second language first-hand and in a relaxed atmosphere.

The free-alternation or mixed language strategy

Using either one language or another for a particular topic, person or situation, is another option. There is not much research on this strategy and it is often considered confusing. However,

for some experts this is the most natural strategy. There are many families who use this strategy, either consciously or unconsciously. In different parts of the world, there are communities where people use several languages interchangeably. Examples of these places are some Asian countries or the Hispanic community in the USA. People there may use a certain language in certain shops, at school, etc. and another language with relatives, or when they read a newspaper or watch TV. These communities usually have a more flexible attitude towards code-switching. Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert, mentioned earlier in question 12, studied families who used the one parent-one language strategy⁴⁵. She found that after a certain time some of them had changed to the mixed strategy because they found it more natural. The mixed strategy might not be best when one of the languages can only be spoken at home, as the other will soon become the dominant one. However, **this strategy may be beneficial for children who grow up in a bilingual family and who also attend a bilingual school where the same languages are spoken** since both languages are present in the child's daily activities.

Whichever strategy parents decide to adopt, before putting their child into bilingual education, they should carefully plan how to **guarantee enough rich exposure to the two languages**. François Grosjean advises parents to **create or arrange opportunities for their child to be in contact with monolingual speakers so that he or she can hear and use language that does not contain samples of code-switching or borrowing**⁴⁶. This will help him or her to learn to adapt their own language to be like that of monolingual speakers.

The language-time or time and place strategy is the one that is successfully used at bilingual schools.

Snack time or the drive home from school may be used to talk with the child in the second language.



17

What support can I give to my child at home before and during bilingual education?

Parents can help children enormously in developing a child's language, whether it be one, two, or multiple languages. Parents can also offer substantial help with homework, even when they do not speak the school language themselves. The knowledge children acquire in any of their languages will be transferred to the other. No tailor-made advice can be given on how to do this; there are many ways to actively support a child. Since each child and each family situation is different, **parents will have to decide in which language they are able to, or should, assist their child.** In the following section, a summary of ideas and suggestions is offered. They can all be used in whichever language parents choose to provide support in.

Talking to your child

The quantity and quality of the language used at home are

Parents can help their children whether they speak the second language themselves or not.

positively related to the vocabulary children acquire. The more parents talk to their child, using varied and decontextualised vocabulary, and the more they encourage him or her to talk, the better the child will be able to put thoughts and feelings into words. Decontextualised language refers to language that is removed from the here and now or from present events. Examples of this type of language are explanations, definitions, narratives or dramatisations and pretend play, but also any communication that does not make use of nonverbal cues (facial expressions, gestures like pointing, waving, etc.). By using decontextualised language, parents provide their child with the opportunity to learn new words and meanings. This in turn is related to the acquisition of reading and writing skills, which are essential for future academic progress at school.



Although it seems obvious to do so, **not all parents talk that much to their children, especially before the age of two.** In a longitudinal study, Meredith Rowe, university professor and researcher, found that the total number of words parents used during a 90-min interaction with their eighteen-month-old children ranged enormously⁴⁷. Some parents in the study only used 360 words whether others used more than 9,200. When the children were 30 months old, some of the parents used no narrative sentences at all during the recorded 90 minutes, whereas others produced over 250. Narrative language is used to talk about past and future events. **Even though the quantity of the input is important, the quality is even more so.** It has also

The quantity and quality of the language parents use with their children positively influences the vocabulary they acquire.

been shown that use of both varied and sophisticated vocabulary as well as decontextualized language when talking to a child has positive implications in the language development of children when they are older.

Personal storytelling

Daily interactions between parents and children often tend to be about the here and now. When parents talk more with their child about the past and the future, they create a major resource for hearing and using language in a variety of contexts. The language used is rich, as it is necessary to use greater detail when talking about the past and the future. Earlier, in question 11 we discussed the importance of storytelling at home. [Personal storytelling is another way to develop decontextualised language](#) because it involves talking about past experiences and future events. Parents can tell stories about themselves when they were small, or encourage their child to tell his or her own stories.

Asking questions

By asking questions, parents help children develop their knowledge and language. Open-ended questions are more productive than those that just require simple yes or no answers. They invite conversations and encourage reasoning and explanation. When parents show interest in what children say and ask questions, children are stimulated to provide more developed and complex answers.

Book reading

Reading books with young children and telling them stories is strongly recommended. Joint book reading is an excellent resource for developing linguistic and communicative skills. It helps children to acquire more varied and richer vocabularies since they learn words that are not frequently used in daily interaction with their parents. Stories can be read aloud and discussed with the child. In this way, the child plays an active role, promoting both immediate and non-immediate talk. The first of these refers to talk related to the words and

Joint book reading is an excellent resource for developing linguistic and communicative skills.

illustrations in a book -the information that can be obtained from the page in the book. For example, the parent may point at a picture of a house and ask "Who lives in this house?" or ask the child to describe the house in detail. Non-immediate talk is an example of decontextualised language and goes beyond the information contained in the text or illustrations. It appears when joint reading is used to initiate other interactions such as telling personal stories, explaining, or talking about the meaning of some words. [What has just been read together can be used as a springboard for conversation](#). While looking at the picture of the house of the child's favourite character in the story, one may ask "Who do you think would also like to live there?" and encourage the child to give longer and more complex answers. Finally, children love listening to or reading stories more than once, and repetition is another factor that fosters the development of their vocabulary.



Creating a print-rich environment

At home we can create an environment that helps children learn to read and develop their vocabulary. Parents can [hang pictures and posters](#) with images or words, in any of the languages, [all around the house](#). An idea may be to choose a 'word of the week' and look for the object at home, in the street

or while shopping. In this way, learning new words becomes a fun activity. Another idea is to use [magnetic letters on the fridge](#) and let the children decipher the words or write words themselves.

Fun activities at home

When only one language is spoken at home but parents have a good command of the (future) school language, they can regularly play with the child in that language, maybe just for 10 minutes a day. They can tell him/her that [they are going to play in the L2 every day](#), and decide on a particular area at home for this. This place can, for example, be called the English Corner (or French Corner, Dutch Corner, and so on). There, parents and children can [tell a story, sing songs or say simple rhymes](#). [Board games](#) such as Scrabble or games like Hangman or I spy are other fun activities that allow language practice. Bookshops specialising in foreign languages often have a lot of educational or learning materials and games for young children. Another resource is the great number of websites with fun or language games that can be played together. An excellent example is the British Council's Learn English website: learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org.

Show that we value the second language

Some parents may not be able to interact with their child in the foreign language nor spend time playing in the foreign language either because they do not speak the language or because their level is not high enough. [Nonetheless these parents can also positively influence the foreign language learning of their children if they show their children that they value the language](#). Parents can not only ask their children to show them words or songs and rhymes in the foreign language, but also make an effort to use the language when they travel abroad, show interest in the culture of the country where the language is spoken or enroll in foreign language classes. [Their own attitude towards the language is a key factor for the motivation their children develop to learn the new language](#).

Baby sitter or au pair

When parents do not speak their child's (future) second language, they can also [look for outside help](#) to create opportunities to use the language. [A teenager or university student with a good proficiency](#) in the language can come regularly to their home and play with the child. Another possibility is having a [native-speaking au-pair](#). There are many boys and girls who wish to go to another country and there are agencies that offer this type of services. They do not only [bring with them the culture of their country](#), but can also help with homework or play with the child in the second language.

TV and DVDs

Carefully selected TV programmes and DVDs can be used to [complement the input and stimulate language development](#). Children usually enjoy watching them and they can be a source for vocabulary enrichment. However, [they are a passive medium and cannot substitute for essential interaction with others](#). Audiobooks, and CDs with stories, songs, and rhymes, are other options; they are perhaps more difficult since there is no visual support, but perhaps also less passive. There is a great deal of audio material available on the internet which can be an excellent source of language, supplementing the input a child receives at school or speaking with other L2 speakers.

Talking about school experiences at home

When children start school in their second language, [they will have many new experiences to share with their parents](#). Sometimes the child may lack the necessary vocabulary to describe those experiences in the home-language. Xiao-lei Wang, the author of *Growing up with Three Languages*, describes several ideas she and her husband used with their trilingual sons⁴⁸. One of them is to [buy some story books that deal with the school environment in the home-language](#). These stories can help to learn the school vocabulary which is unknown in the mother tongue. Also, parents can [ask the teacher about their](#)

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[http://
learnenglish
britishcouncil.
org](http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org)

A website full
of activities in
English that
parents can do
together with
their children.

● ● ●
*There are
several ways to
help a child talk
about his or her
new experiences
at the bilingual
school.*

daily school routines and then help their child to talk about them by saying, for example, “I bet you did ... today” and encourage the child to say more about it. Another option is to ask the child to [do a drawing showing what he or she has done at school](#) and then the parent can talk about the picture with the child, providing the necessary vocabulary. Parents should not be concerned if a child code-switches during these interactions. The context will help the parents to understand what the child is trying to say. Rephrasing (translating) what the child has said will help the child to acquire the vocabulary in the L1.

Helping with homework

At certain points children at bilingual schools (like all children) may need help with their homework. Parents who do not speak the school language often wrongly believe they cannot help their child. In reality they can still provide valuable support for school in the mother tongue. Doing this will help the child transfer the vocabulary and concepts from one language to the other. They can [ask their child to explain new concepts in the mother tongue while helping them with the vocabulary](#). Pupils in higher grades usually do not have difficulties in explaining the subject matter in the mother tongue, and if they have problems with any of the words they can look them up in a dictionary. With younger pupils, parents can [have a look at the child's textbooks or materials before helping them so that they have an idea of the content and are able to think about necessary vocabulary in advance](#). Buying similar textbooks in the mother tongue may also be a solution since the specific vocabulary may be found in these books. Dictionaries and reference books can be useful for looking up vocabulary that is unknown in one of the languages. [Mixing the languages should not be a problem in the event that neither parent nor child knows the exact word in the other language](#). While helping with homework, understanding the subject matter and concepts is more important than the language. Whenever possible, words or phrases should be paraphrased in the mother tongue so that the child, little by little, learns how to express his or her ideas in that language.

Parents who do not know the second language can still help their children with their homework.

Conclusion

This guide has been written with the aim of explaining in simple and clear language a variety of issues related to bilingualism. Relevant research from recent decades was reviewed in order to provide answers to the questions. The answers are also based on opinions of national and international experts in the field of second or third language acquisition. Below is a brief summary of the issues we have looked at.

Bilingualism is not an exceptional phenomenon. It is estimated that more than half of the world's population uses two or more languages in their everyday life.

Some families wish to, and are able to, raise a child as bilingual from birth. Depending on the particular family situation, they may choose to use one language or another (or both) at home, and may opt for a particular strategy.

However, many parents are unable to raise a child as bilingual solely at home; in Spain there is still a high percentage of adults who do not speak a foreign language. For those parents, bilingual education can be a good option.

Parents may decide on either a state school, privately-owned state-funded school, or a private bilingual school such as the British Council School in Madrid. In Spain, the first two usually offer 30-50% instruction in the L2, the latter: 80%.

Bilingualism may bring many advantages: personal, social, cultural and economic, and also cognitive; bilingual children develop enhanced metalinguistic awareness and control of attention. Acquiring two languages early in childhood also fosters divergent thinking and communicative sensitivity. However, bilingualism may also bring with it some disadvantages. Bilingual children usually know fewer words in each of their languages and show lower levels of reading fluency in the second language. However, these drawbacks are minor, especially when compared to the many advantages of being bilingual, another one being that, in an additive bilingual context (as is the case in bilingual schools), bilingualism facilitates third language learning.

The level of bilingualism children may reach depends

on a variety of factors such as the age of onset, the quantity and quality of exposure to the second language, the need to use both languages, or the teacher's competence and skill at school. Each age has its own advantages for learning a new language. Nevertheless, it is advisable to start at an early age. In this way, children can not only benefit from the advantages of early language acquisition but also from those that learning a language at an older age may bring.

Throughout the guide the following different types of bilingualism have been mentioned: simultaneous/successive, balanced/dominant and additive/subtractive. In the case of children who learn a second language at school, we talk about successive bilingualism because they learn the language after the first language has been established. Bilingualism, in this case, can be considered as additive because the acquisition takes place in a culturally enriching environment and the children's two languages are equally valued. As for the distinction between balanced and dominant, it should be taken into account that it is not usual that a person uses the two languages indistinctively. In the case of three or more languages this is even rarer. Bilinguals do not use their two languages in the same contexts, for the same purposes or with the same people. As a result, they tend to be more proficient in one of their languages. However, depending on the amount of instruction in the second language, children may obtain similar fluency in both languages and, therefore, be considered balanced bilinguals. What should not be expected is that children become two monolinguals in one person. They need to be considered 'specific speaker-hearers'.

During the language acquisition process in bilingual schools, children go through four different stages. First, they try to use their home language. Next, they go through a stage in which they do not talk but do try to communicate using nonverbal means. During this period they observe others until, little by little, they begin to say their first words. The language they use is full of one- or two-word phrases and formulas that they hear other people say. Finally, they begin to create their own, longer utterances.

Bilingualism is not related to significant delay in language

acquisition or to language disorders. However, due to a difference in the rate of development of the two languages, children may mix the languages, and the acquisition of some specific structures may occur at an earlier or later time. This mixing of the two languages also occurs in the language produced by bilinguals who are highly proficient in both languages. In this case, the bilingual person decides to mix, either consciously or unconsciously, depending on the communicative situation they find themselves in.

Depending on the quantity and quality of exposure to the languages, it may take children more or less time to become bilingual. There may even be moments when they are reluctant to use one of them. The development of the mother tongue also plays an important role in the L2 acquisition process. Competence in the second language partly depends on the competence children have developed in their first language when they begin learning the second one. Therefore, it is recommended that parents read stories to their children and talk to them a lot when they are young. First, children develop social language and, later on, academic language, which is necessary for good academic performance at school in higher grades. At home, parents can support their children in the process of becoming bilingual. Several ideas and suggestions have been offered in this guide. Depending on their circumstances and family context, parents can choose the suggestions most suitable for their situation. Lastly, the authors of this guide hope that reading it has helped the reader better understand what it means to be bilingual and what it implies. No doubt, this will help you to accompany your child on his or her journey towards bilingualism. Have a good journey!

Books and Internet sites on bilingualism and trilingualism

Books

Almost all publications on raising bilingual children are published in English, and all deal mainly with raising bilingual children at home. However, they do include interesting information for parents who opt for bilingual school education. Except for the publications by François Grosjean and by Alma Flor Ada and Colin Baker, they all include anecdotes and experiences the authors have had while raising their own children with two or three languages.

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Wang, X.-L. (2008). *Growing up with three languages: Birth to eleven*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Web pages

<http://www.bilingualfamilies.net/pages/en/home.php>

<http://www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk/>

www.multilingual-matters.com

<http://www.multilingualbooks.com/bilingual-all.html>

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At present, there is probably not a single parent who would not want bilingual education for his or her child. But, how can we achieve this? Should I speak English to my child all the time? And if I do, will he or she obtain a good command of the mother tongue? Parents who come to our school ask these and many other questions.

This is why the British Council School in Madrid has tried to provide answers to the main doubts parents have about bilingual education.

We hope that each family finds the best option for their children to grow up mastering two, three or even more languages. During the past 75 years, we have seen tens of thousands previously monolingual pupils become balanced bilingual young people. We know it is worth making an extra effort today for providing them with a better future tomorrow.



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